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F.H. Bradley's Theory of History and its Critics

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Abstract

Widely regarded as the first serious work by a British author on the theory of history, the *Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874) was also the first published work by the influential Idealist philosopher F.H. Bradley. Inaugurating what R.G. Collingwood was to call the 'Copernican Revolution' in historical writing, situating the construction of history in the present rather than the past, Bradley's short book paved the way not only for the better-known reflections of Collingwood himself, but for the work of Michael Oakeshott. This article sets out Bradley's arguments regarding the criteria for the writing of critical history and the limits to which all historical writing is subject, before outlining the chief criticisms that have been made of Bradley's work and assessing their merits. It concludes that most criticisms of Bradley's ideas have been misplaced, and that the leading insight of Bradley's argument, namely that history is a special form of current experience, retains its capacity to challenge conventional thinking and has affinities with more recent postmodern theories of history.

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Present Experience and the Problem of Historical Knowledge

In *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), F.H. Bradley addressed the question of whether it was possible to write factual history regarding events which are no longer happening. The 'interest of history', he writes, 'is in the recalling of a course of events which *are not*, which neither exist nor will exist, but which *have* existed.'[1] And for Bradley, for whom whatever is real and truly exists must exist within sentient experience (for it is meaningless to talk of it existing anywhere else), the question can be re-phrased as: how far can past experience be considered an extension of present experience?[2] Only in so far as it can, can history be considered as adding to the stock of human knowledge since knowledge exists only in the present. In essence the question Bradley addresses is how far, and on what terms, can the past experience of others as recorded in various types of testimony (letters, books, diaries, reports and so forth) be accredited as worthy of inclusion in my present world of factual understanding? Can a written account of some event 1,000 years ago ever form part of my present world of fact? What especially prompted this question was the work of critical Biblical scholars of the 19th century such as D.F. Strauss and F.C. Baur.[3] Their researches into the veracity of the Biblical accounts of the life of Jesus had thrown considerable doubt upon nearly the whole of the Gospel stories. As Robert Burns has noted, the young Bradley was 'an enthusiastic Straussian' and *The Presuppositions of*

[1] F.H. Bradley, *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), p. 29.
[2] C.f. F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (1897), where he writes that 'experience means something much the same as given and present fact. We perceive, on reflection, that to be real, or even barely to exist, must fall within sentience. Sentient experience, in short, is reality, and what is not this is not real.' (p. 144).
[3] W.H. Walsh, 'Bradley and Critical History', in A. Manser and G. Stock (eds), *The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (1984), p. 41.

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Critical History was written, in part, to defend their radical critique of Biblical narratives.[1] But if the accounts of early Christianity were not reliable enough to generate factual testimony, was any historical testimony about anything able to sustain true knowledge about the past?[2] This is the question Bradley raises and it is misleading of W.H. Walsh to claim that Bradley was concerned only with the narrow question of 'whether we can believe stories of miraculous events.'[3]

Present experience is the starting point here and the key to the whole. As Bradley remarks: 'Everything … depends on personal experience … when pressed we must come to, and start from that…'[4] My personal present experience constitutes my world, my consciousness. Only what exists in my world is real, and it follows that if history is to exist it must exist in my present world – the world of present experience. This is the only world there is. *A 'fact' is a judgement considered true in present experience, and a fact in history only becomes a real fact when it becomes a fact for me, in present experience*. I judge which present experiences I deem to be facts. The same is true of history: I must judge which past events related within recorded testimony I deem to be facts and therefore real. '…every man's present standpoint', writes Bradley, 'ought to determine his belief in respect to *all* past events…'[5] This is the task of the critical historian: the canon of history is the historian, and 'the historian who is true to the present *is* the historian as he ought to be.'[6] The distinct problem of historical knowledge arises because, whereas present experience is experienced directly by me,

[1] R.M. Burns, 'Collingwood, Bradley, and Historical Knowledge', *History and Theory*, Vol. 45 (2006), p. 196.
[2] C.f. J.H. Muirhead, *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy* (1931), p. 222.
[3] W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1951), p. 106.
[4] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 59.
[5] *Ibid*., p. iii.
[6] *Ibid*., p. ii.

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this is not true of *past experience, which is experienced by others and known to me only via testimony*. Instead of 'facts', 'all we have', remarks W.F. Lofthouse, 'are statements by witnesses, which may be reliable or the reverse.'[1] These testimony accounts we consider to be the product of past consciousnesses. The question is: can I consider these past consciousnesses to be an extension of my own? This, for Bradley, is what history is claiming – i.e. that historical knowledge enriches and increases the scope of present experience as such.

The problem with history is that facts regarding the past cannot be known directly. They can only be known through testimony coming down to us from the past. And even then the testimony is not the fact itself – the fact must be *inferred* from the testimony. Each historical fact has two dimensions: the *objective* event itself, and the *subjective* recollection of it. So the question is: can we *know* past objective facts given that we can only know them through inference from subjective past testimony? Bradley thinks that we can. We *can* regard past consciousnesses as an extension of present consciousness, and past facts can exist as facts in our present experience. 'If nothing is ours which is not in our experience,' remarks Bradley, 'then testimony, if known by us, must be so included…'[2] However, not all past testified 'facts' qualify for admission into our world of the present. It is the role of the historian to judge which recorded events are accorded the status of historical facts and which are not.

> We have seen that history rests in the last resort upon an inference from our experience, a judgement based upon our own present state of things, upon the world as personal in us; and that this is the sole means and justification which we possess for holding and regarding supposed events as real, i.e. as members in and of our universe.[3]

[1] W.F. Lofthouse, *F.H. Bradley* (1949), p. 46.
[2] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 14.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 19.

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The condition the historian ought to apply for admission of past testimony into a present fact is that it be subject to the scrutiny of Critical History.

The Procedure of Critical History

Critical history approaches history with a view to deciding whether a claimed event warrants inclusion in our present universe of facts. *Critical history alone can make a fact real and the only true history is history that has been subject to the critique of critical history*. Historical facts are not simply inherited by historians from the past. History is not a passive process of transcribing facts passed down from previous periods. The business of history is an active, constructive, one.[1] The historian constructs historical facts by exercising his or her critical judgement upon the testimony of the past when deciding which recorded events are actually to be accorded a place in present experience. And the condition that past events must satisfy to warrant inclusion in present experience are the presuppositions of critical history. 'History must ever be founded on a presupposition…'[2] They are the rules and assumptions that underlie present experience and which we apply to the testimony of past experience. If this testimony fails to conform to these presuppositions then it cannot qualify for admission into present experience. All actual history makes use of this process of judgement – what Bradley calls 'prejudication'.

> …every history is necessarily based on prejudication; and experience testifies that, as a matter of fact, there is no single history which is not so based, which does not derive its individual character from the particular standpoint of the author. There is no such thing as a history without a prejudication; the real distinction is between the writer

[1] C.f. Walsh, 'Bradley and Critical History', p. 34.
[2] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 15.

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> who has his prejudications without knowing what they are, and whose prejudications, it may be, are false, and the writer who consciously orders and creates from the known foundation of that which for him is the truth. It is when history becomes aware of its presupposition that it first becomes truly critical ...[1]

What are these presuppositions of present experience? Essentially they are the rules that underlie critical experience – that is, not our everyday personal experience which is chaotic, unsystematic, and confused, but experience that has been made coherent, thoughtful, and integrated by critical observation, with respect both to our own direct personal experiences and the testified experiences of others.[2] This is conscious experience as depicted in Kant's phenomenal world. This universe of present experience exists under laws. These laws include the existence of cause and effect; the existence of objects; the existence of individuals; that individuals do not act randomly. That, above all, that there is *one* world which is the same, past and present, and that present consciousness emerges out of a continuum from past consciousness. This is the present experience of science and is the standard for all experience.

> In a word, the universality of law, and what loosely may be termed causal connection, is the condition which makes history possible, and which, though not for her to prove, she must nonetheless presuppose as a principle, and demonstrate as a result worked out in the whole field of her activity.[3]

[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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The First Criteria: Past Events must be Analogous with Present Experience

This leads to the first and most fundamental criteria of critical history: namely that past testimony can only be accepted as true if it testifies to a past experience that is analogous to present experience. The events related must be compatible with our current experience. The experience that determines which events are to be accepted as history and which are not is *present experience*. It is 'always the present' upon which the past rests.[1] If the events are not analogous with present experience they cannot be accepted as facts in present experience even if the witness to the past events is of unblemished character and veracity. We must assume an 'essential uniformity of nature and the course of events.'[2] Or as Collingwood put it rather more succinctly in a 1935 lecture: '…our experience of the world teaches us that some kinds of thing happen and others do not; this experience, then, is the criterion which the historian brings to bear on the statements of his authorities.'[3] The reason for this is that there must be *one* conscious world. There cannot be two worlds: a world of current science and a world of past non-analogous history. The same truths must apply to both. And in so far as there is a clash, then present scientific experience is more certain than the probabilities of past testimony and the latter must be excluded. On this basis Bradley was clearly allying with the Biblical critics, for past testimony of miracles cannot be consistently accepted in the light of present scientific understanding.[4] Thus 'critical history must have a presupposition, and … this presupposition is the uniformity of law.'[5] This law is the stable relationship between things which is the foundation of all

[1] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[3] R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History* (1999), p. 159.
[4] W.J. Mander, *British Idealism: A History* (2011), p. 177.
[5] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 19.

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science. Things and events are in stable causal relationships with each other, and these relationships hold in the past as much as the present. Past and present are all subject to the same uniformity of law and only events which are compatible with our present understanding of these laws can be accepted as historical facts. In illustration Arthur Danto cites the proposition: that Plato wrote *The Laws* when he was three days old. No amount of evidence, he says, could get us to believe this statement.[1] Bradley admits that we might, in our world of present experience, encounter events which contradict our own understanding of the laws of nature. It is possible, in other words, that we might encounter states of affairs which have no analogy with our experience hitherto. But in this case we can only begin to accept these non-analogous events after painstaking observation and experimentation. And if we are to rely on the testimony of another – say a scientist in a laboratory in some distant country – we must be certain that this other is as rigorous in their observations and experiments as we might be, and shares our fundamental view regarding, say, the role of physical or spiritual processes in the world. Only if we can be thus certain that the testimony is produced by someone with the same diligence and consciousness as us can we entertain the reality of the non-analogous observation. But this can never be true of historical testimony: we cannot be certain that the past observer was sharply critical in their observations, and, more fundamentally, 'the witness', notes Collingwood, 'is always a son of his time, and the mere progress of human knowledge makes it impossible that his point of view and standard of accuracy should be identical with my own. Consequently, no historical testimony can establish the reality of facts that have no analogy in our present experience.'[2]

[1] A. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965), p. 105.
[2] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946), p. 138

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This is not so prohibitive and exclusive as it may sound: present experience is so highly varied that many events are compatible with it. But when they are not they must always be rejected. Even so, this leaves the vast majority of historically received testimony unaffected. Bradley's experience criterion rules out statements that we must consider (in our present) impossible; but there is, as Danto remarks, no compulsion to believe what is *possible*.

> That the philosopher Kant took his mistress to Crete is *believable*. It even has analogues in present experience: some people take their mistresses to Crete. For all that, we are not required to *believe* the statement, but only to allow it is not ruled out by our preconceptions.[1]

So Bradley's critical history requires more than the possibility test – and this he provided.

The Second Criteria: Judging the Quality of Testimony

The second condition of critical history relates to the quality of the testimony itself. When confronted with a piece of testimony regarding past events we must ask of its author such questions as: do we trust this witness? Do we consider that they narrate events accurately? Did they take pains to observe and record carefully? Do they view the world in ways that correspond with the way in which I view the world? Do we, in effect, consider their consciousness as an extension of mine? If our 'objective world is known to be the same', if the witness's 'subjective power of extending the object is known to be equal to mine', then 'the distinction of our individualities makes no

[1] Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, p. 106.

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difference to the matter itself.' Then testimony 'goes beyond individual experience, but not beyond *our* experience; or it takes us beyond our experience if it takes *us* with it.'[1]

The Third Criteria: The Body of Existing Critical Historical Knowledge

The third question posed by critical history is: how do the 'facts' related stand in relation to already critically evaluated and accepted facts – the body of historical knowledge we already possess? If it does we are more likely to accord it the status of a fact in present experience. An implication of this is that our understanding of the past will change as our present historical knowledge evolves. 'For the true world is continually growing, and when part of history has been made real, it at once becomes a means for the realization of the remainder.'[2] A historical fact, then, is the conclusion of a series of judgements.[3] It is for this reason that the very facts of history change over time: as our theoretical understanding changes, as the experience of modern science evolves, as the surrounding body of supporting historical facts changes (for example if new archives are unearthed), then the body of witnessed events that are accorded a place in our stock of critical historical knowledge will change also. Each present must continually reassess what is accepted as true of the past, adding new facts and discarding others.[4]

[1] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 24.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 39.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[4] R. Wollheim, *F.H. Bradley* (1959), pp. 127-28.

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The Probabilistic Nature of Historical Knowledge

In theory it is possible that past facts could be considered as certain as present facts. If the fact is analogous to present experience; if it conforms to existing historical facts; if I totally trust the veracity of the witness; if the witness thinks as I do; and if the event narrated fits within a complete series of recorded events in a seamless way between past and present. If these conditions are fulfilled then past events will be part of my present world with the certainty of present events.

In reality these conditions can never be met. Historical knowledge can only ever be probable and not certain. Past consciousness can never be the same as present consciousness as consciousness evolves over time. The present, having evolved out of the past, thinks differently from the past – since, quite simply, the present knows things (including about the past) which the past cannot know since they had not then happened. Historical testimony itself exists *in* history and this, in itself, 'prevents the identification of our minds with the minds of the witnesses.'[1]

> The historical witness is also the son of time, and, in relation to that which bears most the stamp of the era, his mind is the reflection of the age in a mirror which shares its nature. It is thus that, in his character of recorder, his point of view, when he relates phenomena dissimilar to ours, will also itself not fail to be dissimilar.[2]

Whenever the 'fact' of testimony is made by someone with a world view different from ours (when, for example, the witness possesses a religious consciousness removed from our own), and when we cannot be certain that the judgement of the observer rests

[1] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 33.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

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upon an ordered system that is identical with our own, then we cannot be sure that the facts as narrated were not affected by these beliefs – and then 'the "fact" cannot be affirmed except on analogy…'[1] We cannot, further, be sure that past testimony is sound, reliable, and based on a vigorous effort to ascertain the truth. The historical record will always be incomplete with numerous gaps. History focuses on change and individuals – both of which are very hard to capture adequately. We cannot cross-examine eye-witnesses as would be done in a court room. Historical testimony is never of the fact itself, which must be inferred from the testimony. And so on. 'Such', says Bradley, 'are the obstacles in the way of a scientific historical proof', with the result that the historian's 'reconstruction will never be complete enough to take him beyond a mere probability…'[2] Historical facts are only ever probable, not *certain*.[3]

Constructing a Coherent Past

While the foundation of critical history is the rigorous assessment of written sources so as to arrive at the most probable facts, this is not the end of the historian's activity. For the historian must also seek to understand the past events that have been inferred – and time and time again historians will return to the existing facts (even when they can add no new ones) and engage in 'the ceaseless endeavour more and more thoroughly to apprehend the old material…'[4] What this essentially involves is the attempt to bring the factual material into greater order through the 'active combination' of facts and to go beyond 'a series of chaotic impressions' to 'grasp the

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 31. In this history is comparable to the resolutions of a court of law.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

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course of events as a connected whole.'[1] This Bradley assumes to be a basic predisposition of the mind – the impulse of mind to 'be at home in its object, the longing to think the thing as it is in in itself, and as all men have failed to think it before.'[2] The mind of the critical historian will take the verified facts and construct, in so far as it can, a consistent and rationally mediated whole sequence. How is it to do this? The answer is through the careful establishment of causal relationships between the discreetly ascertained facts. In doing this the historian assumes that he or she occupies the same one world as the natural scientist and that this world is under the rule of causal law. To quote Bradley:

> In a word, the universality of law, and what loosely may be termed causal connection is the condition which makes history possible, and which, though not for her to prove, she must none the less presuppose as a principle, and demonstrate as a result worked out in the whole field of her activity. ... both science and history we find to be agreed, in this namely, that a fact which asserts itself as (loosely speaking) without a cause, or without a consequence, is no fact at all...[3]

Indeed, Bradley goes on to argue that this necessity for the rule of causality means that, for history, the freedom of the individual cannot be assumed for, if 'the actions of man are subject to no law, and in this sense irrational, then the possibility of history, I think, must be allowed to disappear, and the past to become a matter of almost entire uncertainty.'[4] The problem, however, for Bradley was that, as the historian moved beyond constructing facts from testimony to constructing a narrative by combining

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

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facts, so the role of active theorising increases and, thereby, not merely the possibility of ascertaining the truth about the past, but the possibility of error as the historian creates a narrative more reflective of their own interpretation than what the actual known facts can support.[1] And this interpretation, moreover, can never really be critically verified in the way that testimony can (however imperfectly). As a consequence he was sceptical regarding the feasibility of constructing critically coherent interpretations of the past. The historical record was a sparse one and he cautioned against the temptation for historians to fill up the gaps with their own inventive interpolations since what then emerged spoke far more of the mind of the historian than what the actual record of historical facts could sustain. As he wrote:

> But these events thus reasserted by criticism form no continuous whole, the series presents gaps which a positive process is necessary to fill, and the process is an inferential recreation according to law from a basis of present experience or of the historical certainty already attained. … The inadequacy however of the historical material both in respect of quantity and quality makes the completion in this manner of the series of events an impossibility, and the persistent attempts to join the open links by the creation of causes and motives can lead to nothing but an overstrained Pragmatism, which fills the past with those fancies and opinions which only belong to the individual consciousness of the writer.[2]

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

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Summary of Bradley's Argument

1. History as a body of real facts about the past exists only in the present. It is we in the present who make history when we admit testified past events into realities within our present experience. 'The historical fact … is a conclusion.'[1]
2. In acknowledging a past-testified event as a fact in present experience we apply presuppositions – rules, usually implicit, that determine their acceptance. These are the presuppositions of critical history.
3. The most important presupposition is that the world of the past and the world of the present are one and the same world. What happened in the past must be compatible with the world known to present scientific experience. If it is not, then it cannot be admitted to present experience and cannot be a fact.
4. In critically evaluating a past 'fact' we must also: first, evaluate the testimony that supports it so as to determine how far we can regard it as a proxy for our own experience; and second, we must critically assess the testified evidence in the light of already accepted historically understood fact.
5. Due to limitations of testimony from always questionable witnesses, the lack of supporting testimony, an inability to cross-examine witnesses, and, above all, the fact that the consciousness of past witnesses cannot be the same as ours for the simple reason that people in the past think differently from people in the present, we conclude that while past events can be accepted as probable when compatible with present experience, they can never certain.

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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6. History can never be merely the assembling of discreet critically verified facts. The historian must also seek to bring those facts into coherent order with a view to providing an interpretation of the past satisfying to the rational mind. Here, too, presuppositions are entailed: most notably the assumption of causal relationships between events.[1]
7. Yet again deficiencies within the historical record mean that the degree to which historians can construct plausible coherent accounts of the past is very limited and historians are continually tempted to force their understanding of the whole beyond what the facts permit by employing their own 'fancies and opinions'.[2]

Critical Reflections

According to W.H. Walsh, Bradley's essay was 'the first serious piece of writing in English on truth and fact in history' and 'the first to argue that historical facts are "constructions" or "constitutions', along the lines later followed by Collingwood, Oakeshott, and Leon Goldstein'.[3] Unsurprisingly, therefore, Collingwood argued that Bradley accomplished a 'Copernican revolution … in the theory of historical knowledge…'[4] For what Bradley showed was that it was not the role of the historian to simply be led by the sources, but rather, it was the historian who judges the sources. History is made, not by past sources bequeathed to us, but by present historians who critically interpret the sources and use their own criteria to determine which aspects of the account, if any, are accepted as historical fact.

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[3] Walsh, 'Bradley and Critical History', p. 34
[4] Collingwood, *Principles of History*, p. 160.

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Yet Bradley's interpretation of the process of historical construction has been subject to several criticisms – by Collingwood himself and others.

1. **That Bradley's emphasis upon present experience as the locus of history leads to relativism**. W.F. Lofthouse, for example, contended that if in all historical writing the facts are subsumed into the writer's self and his world, then we shall have 'many histories, but no history.'[1] Writers who live in different worlds, with different presuppositions, will be guided by different rules and will produce different histories of the same events. For example, if a writer believes that Jesus is the Son of God, or that miracles are present realities, then their judgements about which testimonies represent present knowledge will differ from a historian who does not accept these things. As Walsh similarly observed, for Bradley there are "no facts but my facts".[2] What we have here, of course, is historical relativism, with historians producing multiple accounts of the past none of which can be held to be superior to another.[3] In some respects this is undeniably the outcome: any perusal of the library shelves will reveal all-too-clearly that there is not *one* history of the past but many, each of which was, presumably, true within the present experience of each of the authors.

   However, there are several considerations that prevent us slipping into a solipsistic world of a myriad of private histories. First, Bradley emphasises that there is a given body of historical knowledge within which the historian must operate – they cannot just make up an arbitrary past of their own. As

[1] Lofthouse, *F.H. Bradley*, p. 51.
[2] Walsh, 'Bradley and Critical History', p. 36.
[3] C.f. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, p. 107.

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Walsh remarks, historical thought 'starts from history as a going concern' and this 'imposes powerful constraints on what historians can conclude.'[1] Indeed, this body of ever-developing historical knowledge represents one of his criteria of critical history against which any given fact must be checked. Second, the criterion of historical knowledge is reason – rationality is one of its presuppositions. Historical statements must not assert contradictory propositions and so cannot be merely the whim of the historian. Third, the experience Bradley refers to is not really my actual experience: it is systematic, rational, experience – what he calls 'present critical experience.'[2] The basic point of his essay was to support the contention of Baur that, while Christians might start out with the assumption that miracles happen, the historian must start from a scientific secular understanding of the world compatible with modern understanding of the present.[3]

2. **That Bradley's past is a past relative to our present and not, writes Walsh, 'a past which existed absolutely'**.[4] This is true. But for Bradley nothing exists absolutely independent of experience. This holds for both present and past. The present only exists relative to present experience, and past events too, even if we consider them as happening independent of our present experience, would still only have existed relative to the experiences of those who perceived them at the time. There is, for Bradley, no reality outside of our experience, so it is nonsensical to talk of an absolutely existing past

[1] Walsh, 'Bradley and Critical History', p. 36.
[2] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 60.
[3] Walsh, 'Bradley and Critical History', p. 41.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 36.

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outside of experience. The past can only exist *now* since there is nowhere else it *can* exist.

3. **That Bradley assumes that, not only are physical laws the same through history, but that human behaviour and thought is constant too.** If Bradley's criterion of analogy from present experience is to work, then he has, says Walsh, to assume that men in the past were fundamentally like us, for only then can he 'justify his claim that present experience is the final test of what is historically credible. He must presume that men in the past were *ultimately* like ourselves, however differently we and they behave in situations apparently similar.'[1] Walsh questions this assumption. May not, he asks, 'history surprise us by recording actions, reactions, ways of thinking and behaving which are remote from those we see around us? However constant physical nature may be, is it not one of the lessons of history that man is indefinitely various…'[2] If so, then the 'contention that "present experience" is the touchstone of what is historically credible' is 'seriously misleading'.[3] Collingwood similarly writes that the conditions of human life have varied so much over time that we cannot dismiss an account of a past event because it doesn't conform to present experience. 'That the subjects of the Roman Empire worshipped their emperors as gods is no less true for being unlike anything that happens in the British dominions…'[4] However, there is reason to believe that Walsh and Collingwood are wrong on this point. Walsh believes that Bradley is committed to the idea that the 'springs of human action' are unchanging. But

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[4] Collingwood, *Principles of History*, p. 160

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what are the 'springs of human action'? The phrase seems to refer to the basic impulses of humans and it is hard to argue that these *have* changed through history as they are closer to the physical aspect of man than his social or cultural aspect. Such springs of action as the quest for food and sustenance, jealousy, self-defence, rivalry for power, sexual desire and such like would indeed appear to be constant features of what it means to be human at all and, as such, worthy of being regarded as analogous between past and present. Yet with regard to the *mentality* of humans, the way they see and interpret their world, and how they act on the basis of such interpretations, then Bradley explicitly recognises that in this respect people *do* change over time. He states that past people did not see the world as we do – that history is progressive in the sense of exhibiting qualitative change. Man's nature, says Bradley, is 'progressive', and 'history is concerned … with the most human part of humanity, and hence the most fully progressive.'[1] Indeed, he demonstrates that past man cannot think like present man by citing the evolution of the fruit of a tree:

> If the bud were self-conscious it would know itself, but not in the way that the blossom knows it, still less as the fruit knows it: and as failing of the truth its knowledge must be said to be false. Still more is it so with history … the consciousness of the earlier stage of humanity is never consciousness of a later development. The knowledge it has of itself is partial and false when compared with the epoch of an intenser realization. And when we reflect that for this highest development it is that history exists, we see that it is a hope doomed

[1] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 34.

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only to disappointment, when the present expects in the mind of the past to find the views and beliefs of the present.[1]

So while man's animal nature may be unchanging, his mind evolves through time.[2] It is this very fact that the historical witness is 'the son of his time', with his mind 'the reflection of the age in a mirror which shares its nature', which means that past consciousnesses cannot be considered extensions of our own and for this reason alone testimony of past events can only ever be probable not certain.[3] Consciousness is *in* history and for this reason human behaviour and thought will not be the same through history. Thus, Walsh is wrong to suggest that Bradley must assume an unchanging human as well as physical nature. Further, the requirement that past events be analogous with present experience is not so limiting as Walsh and Collingwood suggest. If humans are infinitely variable in the past, they are extremely variable in the present too: 'The present experience, which is open to our research, is so wide in its extent, is so infinitely rich in its manifold details, that to expect an event in the past to which nothing analogous now corresponds may fairly be considered a mere extravagance'.[4] Indeed, the range of present human experience is so wide – ranging from the thinking of computer scientists to the tribal customs of the aborigines – that as a critical criterion for the analysis of past testimony it would appear to be hardly critical at all.

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[2] Robert Burns make this point in his assessment of the relationship between Bradley and Collingwood: R.M. Burns, 'Collingwood, Bradley, and Historical Knowledge', p. 188.
[3] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, pp. 33-34.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

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4. **That Bradley's reasoning was overly infused with a positivist interpretation of science, with the result that he failed to recognise that history is an autonomous form of knowledge**. What Bradley proposes to do, Collingwood suggests, is to apply to historical material a ready-made body of present experience. This body of experience exists prior to and independent of the historian's work and is the foundation of historical knowledge. Since it is the criteria of historical fact it cannot owe anything to historical fact. History as a subject cannot inform it. So where does it come from? 'Bradley … conceives it as scientific knowledge, knowledge of the laws of nature.'[1] This, says Collingwood, is where Bradley's thought is infected by positivism, adopting such empiricist assumptions as that the experience of certain facts was a source of knowledge, that the course of nature is uniform, and that the unknown must resemble the known.[2] There is a further contradiction here. Science is based on induction and thus can only yield laws which are probable and not certain. Yet Bradley treats these laws as certain and thereby able to determine what can and cannot have happened in the past. This it cannot do since any event may call into question an inductive law, and this could happen in the past as much as in the future. The point, for Collingwood, is that *while the historian must have a criterion by which to judge past events, that criterion is not the historian as scientist but simply the historian as historian.*

[1] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 139.
[2] Collingwood, *Principles of History*, p. 158.

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> It is only by practising historical thought that he learns to think historically. His criterion is therefore never ready-made; the experience from which it is derived is his experience of historical thinking … History is its own criterion; it does not depend for its validity on something outside itself; it is an autonomous form of thought with its own principles and its own methods.[1]

Bradley, says Collingwood, could not advance to this position given the dominance of natural science as the paradigm of thinking in the 1870s.[2] It might be argued, however, that Collingwood goes too far in his critique of Bradley here. First, Bradley did not ground the validation of past testimony solely on the criteria of present scientific experience – he referred also, as we have seen, to the writings of other historians and the assessment of past witnesses with regard to reliability. Second, history cannot, purely by itself, validate its own content. How, for example, is history to reject a testified miracle if the only other historical accounts either corroborate it or say nothing about it? There are numerous recorded accounts of miracles in human history from diverse sources and times, and in critically scrutinising these the historian is bound to (and really cannot avoid) employing knowledge acquired in the present – such as the currently understood laws of physics. This point is made by R.F. Atkinson, who asks 'whether history in a narrow, approximately ordinary sense can generate all its own criteria of possibility', and the 'answer to *this* question is No.'[3]

[1] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 140.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] R.F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation in History: An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1978), pp. 91-92.

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5. **Collingwood's second major criticism of Bradley is that he 'said nothing' about the practice of 'constructive history', producing, in effect, a series of critically endorsed facts but no coherent narrative to make sense of them.**[1] By constructive history Collingwood meant the process of formulating a coherent account of the past based, but not confined, to critically ascertained facts. To do this one had to interpolate 'between the statements borrowed from our authorities, other statements implied by them'. It is only by supplementing the authorities in this way that historical narrative could acquire its continuity. Without it we would have only a series of isolated facts and not history at all.

> The historian's picture of his subject, whether that subject be a sequence of events or a past state of things, thus appears as a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities; and if these points are frequent enough and the threads spun from each to the next are constructed with due care, always by the *a priori* imagination and never by arbitrary fancy, the whole picture is constantly verified by appeal to these data, and runs little risk of losing touch with the reality which it represents.[2]

Of course the most celebrated aspect of this imaginative reconstruction of the past advocated by Collingwood was his concept of the re-enactment of past thought as a means to understand the actions of past actors. It is Collingwood's

[1] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 240.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 242.

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criticism that Bradley neglected this aspect of the historian's activity. However, in this he is incorrect for Bradley *did* recognise that the writing of history had a constructive dimension. The very past facts that were being forged through criticism were created and not merely passively reproduced. The historian, he writes, 'is not and cannot be merely receptive, or barely reproductive. It is true that he may not actually add any new material of his own, and yet his action, in so far as he realises that which never as such has been given to him, implies a preconception, and denotes in a sense a foregone conclusion.'[1] First, as we have seen, the actual facts of history are not the testimony itself (though of course the testimony is itself a fact in history) but the actually occurring events which are to be *inferred* from it, and this involves the active construction of the historian.[2] Second, these facts and the testimony from which they are inferred are constructed by the historian – as all acts of perception are according to Bradley. All assertions, says Bradley, are 'intellectual'; they entail a 'judgement which implies the exercise of the understanding; and the terms united by the judgement must therefore fall within the sphere of the understanding. They must be objects for the intellect … in a word intelligible.'[3] Statements about the world involve the constructive work of the intellect and this is especially true of statements about the past since historical facts aren't constructed directly from sense data in the way present experience is – they are constructed from the competing testimony of past witnesses and adjusted in the light of existing scientific and historical knowledge. All of this entails the constructive faculties

[1] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 5.
[2] C.f. Burns, 'Collingwood, Bradley, and Historical Knowledge', p. 188.
[3] Bradley, *Presuppositions*, p. 8.

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of the historian. Third, as we noted above, Bradley recognises that the writing of history does not merely entail assembling facts about the past – it also involves the continual attempt to integrate that material into a coherent and rational order under the law of causal relations. Thus, Collingwood was wrong to say that Bradley gave no attention to the constructive dimension of history. Where Bradley parted company with Collingwood was in regard to the general feasibility of this procedure, being far more sceptical regarding the possibility of constructing coherent interpretations of the past owing to the paucity of the historical record and the temptation of historians to close gaps in the factual record by speculation. Further, Bradley's reasoning led him to reject what would later become Collingwood's own doctrine of historical re-enactment. This is because Collingwood's theory assumed the ability of the historian to think his or her-self into the mind of past historical actors. This Bradley could not accept for the simple reason that the mind evolves over time: the consciousness we possess now is the heir to the consciousnesses of the past and hence we cannot know what it would be like to think like someone who was ignorant of the later developments to which we have access. To think like someone of the Middle Ages, reflected Oakeshott, 'we must discard the experience of the last 500 years and put ourselves into the position of a man who is ignorant of all the discoveries and ideas which have taken place and grown up in that intervening period – a thing impossible to achieve.'[1]

[1] M. Oakeshott, 'History is a Fable', in M. Oakeshott, *What is History? And Other Essays* (2004), p. 38.

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Conclusion

How far can we consider Bradley's arguments with respect to history to be justified? His fundamental proposition that history exists in the present and not the past seems unquestionable. While history is about the past, the practise of history must always occur in the present.[1] Given this, Bradley is surely right to say that historians must have some criterion by which to assess which past testified events warrant inclusion in the world of presently understood fact. All historians operate with such criteria – the question is what are they and what should they be? Bradley's contention that our understanding of the past be consistent with our understanding of the present would also seem to be incontrovertible with respect to its physical aspect. While our present understanding of the physical world is not, as Bradley suggests, certain, the fact remains that no historian can approach the world of the past as if it ran along different physical lines from the present. He or she cannot inhabit a world where miracles don't happen, and then write of the past as if they did. But as Collingwood correctly observed, a doctrine that really only excludes past testimony of miracles 'is of sadly little use to the ordinary historian.'[2] The pertinent question is what does Bradley's criterion tell us about past human actions? Here his standard of present coherent experience tells us relatively little. As Bradley himself acknowledges, present human experience is so varied that there is hardly anything in the past that can be considered to be non-analogous to it and historians do not, in reality, use this test when

[1] The idea that history is a mode of present experience was more fully elaborated by Michael Oakeshott in his *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), where he writes, for example, that 'There is no history independent of experience … History is experience, the historian's world of experience; it is a world of ideas, the historian's world of ideas.' p. 93.
[2] Collingwood, *Principles of History*, p. 160.

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approaching a new piece of historical evidence. Rather, they apply the coherence theory that Bradley himself points to in his third criterion of critical history: namely how does *this* piece of testified evidence fit within my already pre-existing body of historical knowledge? When we wish to check the accuracy or validity of an historical account of the past we do not hold it up and compare it with the actual past; what we in fact do is compare this historical account with the accounts given in other accounts. It is for this reason that a Postmodernist like Keith Jenkins recommends replacing the word 'history' with 'historiography' as the name for the discipline of historical study.[1] This test cannot yield certainty since, even if the problems of fragmented and tainted evidence are set to one side, the fact remains that the history we construct is only provisional and must continually be amended in the light of new evidence or re-interpretation of existing evidence. But the same is true of science, which also is a set of provisional theories which are being continually reformulated in the light of new data. Bradley admits that the critical historian cannot simply gaze upon his collection of accepted facts but must seek to organise them into a coherent whole under the principle of causality. He argues, however, that the challenges posed to the historian by the paucity of critically vindicated facts makes this enterprise usually impossible. His caution with respect to such historical theorising is well taken, but the instinct of the mind to assemble its material, to identify relationships, and to make – in Bradleys own words – the crooked straight, is irrepressible and finds expression in every work of history as it does in science, even though all theories in both disciplines eventually prove unsustainable in the light of new evidence. The special characteristic of history is not with respect to the degree of certainty of our knowledge about it, but with respect

[1] K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (1991)

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to the fact that it is a subject which exists in the present but which refers continually to a non-existent past, and this, as Oakeshott argued, makes it a distinct and autonomous mode of experience.

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